Melanie Jewett – UK NCIUA Ambassador

4th June 2016

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Hello everybody, my name is Melanie Jewett and I am honoured to be here to talk to you today and become involved in the role of the NCIUA UK Ambassador.

As a cochlear implantee myself, I would like to talk to you this morning about my own personal journey and the way that this amazing device has changed me and transformed my life.

As a brief overview, I started losing my hearing, very gradually from the age of 11, primarily it was just high pitches and over time progressively became worse until becoming profoundly deaf in my late 30’s.

Hearing aids never worked for me, and when I was offered the chance to go through the cochlear implant assessment, I had nothing to lose.

Despite being able to mostly laugh off mistakes I made, it was becoming more and more frustrating and I was finding it harder to cope in the hearing world. This was despite wonderful support from family and friends and without realising it, also teaching myself to lip read over the years.

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I was thankfully accepted as a suitable candidate and was implanted in July 2010 and had my switch on in the August.

As most of you know, the hard work of learning to hear again then began.
I pushed myself hard, constantly asking questions – what was that sound? And registering it, using audio books, never taking the processor off if my surroundings became too loud and noisy but persevering and getting used to a very different and new way of hearing again in this very noisy world.

Gradually, over time, my confidence came back and I was finding myself a lot less dependent on other people doing things for me….hearing for me…

And this was the most important thing – It Gave Me Confidence.

My hearing tests were showing incredible results and it made me realise that in certain situations that used to scare me before….I can do this….I will do this.

I began to use the phone! Albeit, for short and to the point calls, but I was doing it. I was no longer petrified of it and asking someone else to make appointments for me, or even worse, getting in my car and driving to the vets / doctors / dentist and making the appointment face to face. I was picking up that handset and phoning people.

I came to realise that even some hearing people dislike the phone and really, what was the worst that could happen?! I could hang up at any point.

But I didn’t and on the back of this, I became involved in helping at telephone workshops at the Southern Region (Auditory Implant Service) AIS. I loved it and was doing something I wouldn’t have dreamed of trying to do a few years previously, I would have absolutely cringed at the thought.

Another area I became involved in at the AIS and something that I was very passionate about doing was being a speaker at the User Group meetings for new potential implantees.

I had always wanted to give something back and help where possible, so having the chance on numerous occasions to go and speak to others about my journey was a very rewarding and fulfilling opportunity.

The staff are truly amazing at the AIS, but I think only going through the cochlear implant process first hand can you really answer some of those questions that people have.

So, outside of the AIS how was my life changing….how was I benefitting from my implant?

We have all had them, those watery eye moments where you hear something special or forgotten for the first time. For me, my ‘want’ was to hear my god children and nephews as and when they said funny things…when they said them! Not 5 minutes later when people had finished laughing and then told me….but in that moment.

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The first time my god daughter sang the Adelle song, Someone Like You, to me was one of those special moments, didn’t I blub!. The curiosity and interest I get from my nephews, constantly pulling back my hair to look at auntie Mel’s magic ear and try and understand how it works is another feeling that is very overwhelming….as is actually trying to explain it to a 5 year old! Then, there is also their hilarious dancing, to music….that I can hear!

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There is the hearing what my running friends are saying when they are behind me and not having to constantly run alongside me, with me straining my neck to see their faces….

They have to be careful what they say about me behind my back now, and it is quite amusing to hear some of those noises us runners make….heavy breathing and worse…

The 6 London marathons I have run since my switch on have been very overwhelming. The music, the crowds….being able to chat confidently to other runners.

Running fun aside, from a safety point of view, my implant has immensely helped me with my awareness, primarily with traffic, especially when running in country lanes with no pavements, but also when racing…. for announcements or if an ambulance needs to get through out on the course.

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I hear the little tip tap of my dogs claws on my wooden floor, I hear him snoring…

There is also the disapproving chatty objections I now hear when he knows I am going out….Everything was coming back….and to this day, still is and I love it all.

Only recently I was filling my car up at a garage alongside the noisy motorway and from behind me, without looking, I worked out I could hear the beeps of someone doing the air in their tyres. Almost 6 years on there are still moments that surprise me. Not as often as in the early days of course, but still enough to make me smile and appreciate this wonderful piece of apparatus and how much it gives me.

I most certainly would never have had the nerve to do anything like this today and stand up and talk in front of you all…and I would also never have had the confidence and courage to become involved in an amazing and very much life changing opportunity in 2013 The Deaflympics!

Can I please ask, can you raise your hand if you are aware that the Deaflympics exists!?

Until 2010, I had no idea myself, and being a marathon runner with 57 marathons under my belt at that point, I was shocked when I discovered that it had been going since 1924, so when I found out about it, I was desperate to see if I could compete for my Country and take advantage of my disability in this way, doing something that I love.

I qualified for my distance, the marathon… and was also selected to run the 10,000m as well. Knowing that at the age of 41, I was given the chance to run for and represent my country was incredible and made me train as hard as I possibly could. I followed my training plan to the letter so that I knew, when I got to that start line, I had done everything that I physically could to be as ready as possible.

Please watch this video:

http://www.bslzone.co.uk/sofia-2013-deaflympics/athlete-profiles/melanie-jewett/

I felt incredibly lucky to have this opportunity and so on the 21st July I took my processor off, I put on my kit and I raced for Team GB for the first time in my life and can proudly say, I won the first medal of the Deaflympic Games for Great Britain.

Conditions were tough in the heat, but I managed to dig in, hold on and win the bronze!

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Words cannot describe how stupidly happy and proud I was, and even now, I still am.

Not only did I win the medal, something that has not happened by a female athlete since Liz Yelling won bronze at the Commonwealth Games in 2006, and do something that Paula Radcliffe has never achieved at the Olympics at this distance, but I also smashed the Deaf British Record by 10 minutes

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What an amazing opportunity and experience from being deaf! The excitement and encouragement this gave to the rest of the team when I met up with them really did move me. I was having one of the most amazing times of my life, living, eating and breathing like a professional athlete.

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Finish line:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gnw49NkQ0W8#t>

Eight days later saw me taking part in the 10,000m on track in Sofia.

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This was a race ran in extreme heat, 38 degrees, but hotter track side and I came 6th out of the 12 starters and was very happy with that. Due to the heat, 4 people collapsed, with 3 needing serious medical treatment, so I was happy just to finish in one piece and feel relatively ok, despite being made to run an extra lap after I finished…but that is a different story…

Team GB won 5 medals in total, making me a key part of the British team.

Medal ceremony:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UNfB55KQo8A>

Unfortunately, Team GB does not get any funding at all to participate at the Deaflympics, or any other Deaf World events, so another area where I had to push myself and find my confidence was in fund raising.

I was determined enough to approach local businesses, newspapers, magazines and councils for funding, I raised money through events at work and I also raised money at a fundraising dinner at a local restaurant that supported me.

I achieved the amount required, but would I have had the courage to do this before my implant….I know that sadly, the answer to that is probably no….The adventure did not stop here!

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In the September of the same year, I was asked to go to the Hearing Dogs UK headquarters in High Wycombe and open their late summer fair. This was such an honour and a really lovely day, combining two very passionate interests of mine, dogs and promoting the Deaflympics.

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I also won my region and was selected as one of the ten regional finalists in the Specsavers Sound Barrier Star Awards, a UK competition to find people who have triumphed despite their own hearing difficulties.

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I then won the Senior Disability Sports Person of the year at the Eastleigh Sports Awards & I was also nominated in the same category for the Hampshire Sports Awards a few months later. My running club too, recognised me as Female Athlete of the year.

So, I think that I can safely say that having my cochlear implant has changed me, I have become a better person for it, a more confident and outgoing person for it.

As well as everything that the Deaflympics gave me, I have also been involved in Deaf Awareness week. Again this led to magazine and newspaper articles and initially quite frighteningly, live radio interviews. The first time I did one I was petrified that I would not hear what was being asked of me, live on air, but it all went really well and I grew to love them and was on Radio Solent 4 times in total!

Katie Martin who interviewed me on the radio had a brother who suffered with deafness, yet she did not know about cochlear implants and I think this is something that needs more awareness.

She proved that most people have a family member with deafness, or will know someone who has, we need to help educate these people about the cochlear implant, how it works and that it is not ‘just like a hearing aid’ but what an incredible change it can make to somebody’s life.

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Thank you for listening to me today and my experiences of becoming an implantee and the Deaflympics after this incredible opportunity.

I hope that I have shown how I trained every day and wanted to prove that no matter who you are and what your situation is, you can achieve anything when you put your mind to it.’

Go for it and take something positive out of our disability and embrace the opportunities we have, not those that inhibit us…

I know that I would not qualify to run for Great Britain at the marathon in any other way than being by being deaf and by being fast enough for the Deaflympics.

Please feel free to ask any questions.